

A Look Back at Civil Service in Michigan Turns 70!



Introduction

The Civil Service Commission celebrates its 70th year in existence in August 2007. Throughout the past seven decades, the Civil Service Commission withstood a great deal of scrutiny and challenges to ensure the provisions of Article XI, Section 5, of the Michigan Constitution are upheld. We hope you will find the history of the Civil Service Commission interesting.

History

During the 19th century, patronage systems developed in governments across the country. Awarding jobs in government to political allies became an unquestioned perk for the party in power. After President Garfield's assassination by a disgruntled office seeker, Congress passed the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act of 1883, which established a merit system for federal employment. That same year, New York established a state civil service system under legislation introduced by Theodore Roosevelt and signed by Governor Grover Cleveland. Nine other states followed suit over the next 50 years.

In October 1935, Governor Frank Fitzgerald created a five-member Civil Service Study Commission to examine personnel practices in Michigan's state government. In July 1936, the Study Commission issued a 90-page report that detailed a dysfunctional state of affairs and recommended creating a civil service system.

A principal problem noted in the report was high employee turnover because of political patronage. While never formalized, employees were expected to contribute one to two percent of their salary back to the party. The Study Commission also noted that state employees routinely performed political work while on the clock for the state.

Conditions of employment also varied tremendously across agencies. With no classification or compensation plans, the Study Commission found that some employees were paid one-half or one-third of others doing similar work. Further hindering attempts to develop or maintain competent employees was the lack of any system for rating, training, disciplining, or keeping records for employees, and no uniform leave or vacation policies or payroll oversight to audit abuses in pay or absenteeism.

The Study Commission proposed draft legislation to create a Civil Service Commission, a Department of Civil Service, and a State Personnel Director. The powers and duties in the draft legislation are largely recognizable to those familiar with our system today. The Commission would create classification and compensation plans for all classified civil service positions, certify the qualification of employees, and establish the conditions of employment for the classified workforce. The director and departmental staff would implement the system. The draft legislation also banned political activity and partisan considerations. The legislature made minor changes to the Study Commission's proposal, but passed a significant State Civil Service Act that Governor Frank Murphy signed into law in August 1937.



Civil Service and Merit System History 70 Years

(from 1937 to 2007)

Although the new law did not take effect until January 1938, Governor Murphy quickly appointed Commissioners who held their first meeting on September 24, 1937, at the State Capitol. At the same time, the first State Personnel Director, William Brownrigg, was busy searching for employees and staff to allow the new department to hit the ground running. By July 1938, a classification system, salary schedule, and examination system were in place for 1,200 different classes of positions. Examinations were administered to all incumbents, which led to the dismissal of 8.3 percent of the spoils-era employees and the demotion of 3.5 percent.

The Ripper Act

Governor Fitzgerald died in 1939, shortly after his re-election. Two months after his death, the new Governor, Luren Dickinson, signed the so-called "Ripper Act," which gutted the 1937 Act. Most significant was its removal of positions from the classified service. Before the Ripper Act, 90 percent of state positions were classified; only half remained after, with most being lower-level non-professional positions. The amendments also shifted power from the State Personnel Director to salaried commissioners. Meanwhile, appropriations for the department, the number of employees, and the director's salary were all reduced by half. The Ripper Act demonstrated that a statutory civil service system was subject to manipulation by the stakeholders in the spoils system.

Restoration of the Civil Service Commission

Citizens groups that had supported passage of the original State Civil Service Act worked to place the civil service system in the State Constitution to protect it from legislative manipulation. They proposed a constitutional amendment that restored most positions to the classified service and most civil service operations to their status before the Ripper Act. The amendment further protected the Commission's independence from legislative interference by stripping the legislature's ability to regulate conditions of employment and guaranteeing annual appropriations to the Commission of one percent of the state payroll. In November 1940, 52 percent of Michigan voters supported the civil service amendment, which then took effect on January 1, 1941.

The new Civil Service Commission quickly enacted rules and resumed the work its statutorily created predecessor had begun in September 1937. Over the last 70 years, the Commission, Director, and Department have worked to protect the classified civil service from partisan influence and allow qualified employees to work with the proper focus on efficiently achieving the state's business for its citizens. We continue to do so today.



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